

BRIDE OF THE ANTARCTIC

Amelia Reynolds Long, writing as Mordred Weir

Strange Stories, 1939

THE three of us who were to spend the long Antarctic night in the little camp on the coast of Victoria Land stood on the edge of the shelf ice and watched the hull of the *Stormy Petrel* slip further and further into the distance. Finally, seen through the ghostly shroud of the sea-mist, she appeared more like a mirage than a real ship. Then, because we could not bear the moment when she should fade from our sight entirely, we turned back to the huge bonfire which we had built as a kind of parting salute to her.

The wood for that bonfire had been discovered when the crew of the *Petrel* were helping to lay the foundations for the shack in which we were to spend the winter making weather observations. It had consisted of a number of old boxes and casks, most of them broken and battered by the Antarctic blizzards that had passed over them. They were the derelict remains of a former camp that had occupied the spot.

Farrell had pointed to some half obliterated letters on one of the boxes.

“Remains of the Howell Expedition,” he had observed. “I knew their camp was around here somewhere.”

A shiver that was not due to the polar cold had passed over Farrell and he had added grimly: “I hope we have better luck than they did.”

Everyone knew about the ill-fated Howell Expedition, and about Mad Bill Howell, its leader and organiser, who had forced his young and beautiful wife to accompany him upon a project that would tax the stamina of even the stoutest men. When the ship had sailed away, leaving Howell, his wife, and fourteen others upon that lonely wasteland of perpetual snow and ice, the girl had cried and begged to go back with it; but Howell had strangely, stubbornly refused.

What his motive was, nobody ever knew. Some said it was jealousy; others, that it was sheer, inhuman love of wanton cruelty. But in any case, he was bound and determined that the girl should remain a prisoner there in the barren fastness of the southern pole, condemned to undergo its harrowing torture of cold and darkness along with himself.

That winter had been hard, even for the Antarctic; and the ship returning to pick them up in the spring was almost two months late in reaching them. When at last it succeeded in forcing its way through the pressure ice and dropping anchor in the little cove upon which the camp had been situated, its crew beheld only a few snow-covered mounds, like forsaken graves, where its buildings should have been.

At first sight it looked as though the entire company had perished; then from an opening in one of the mounds, they saw two gaunt, bedraggled figures emerge and come running toward them. The two were Captain Howell and the cook, Jim Witherspoon. All the others, including Gloria Howell, had died during the long winter night.

Both men collapsed upon being taken aboard ship; but Jim Witherspoon had talked in his delirium, and some of the things he had said were awful. He babbled of how the subzero cold had set in; a cold for whose unexpected intensity the expedition had been unprepared. He told how the first man had died, and his body, placed in a packing-case, had been buried in a shallow grave in the ice. Then had followed another and another, while those who remained grew a little more crazed each day by the horror and the cold. And through it all, Gloria Howell had ironically gone on living.

Last of all, Witherspoon raved about one hideous time toward the end of the polar night, when the girl, unable to endure the torment longer, had cried aloud for warmth and light, and Mad Bill Howell, her husband, in a fit of savage rage...

But that part was the nightmare of delirium, of course. Not even such a sadistic monster as Captain Howell would have turned a human creature, stripped naked, out into the merciless cold of the Antarctic blizzard!

After the return to America, Howell had disappeared completely from the public eye, and even from the ken of his friends. Considering what he must have had on his conscience, even discounting the cook's ravings, it was no wonder.

Thoughts something like this were flitting through my mind as I watched my two companions, Farrell and Murdock, heap more wood upon the fire. They worked with an almost feverish activity; and somehow I got the impression that they were labouring to be rid of the last material remains of that other, ill-fated camp.

At last Farrell, with a mighty heave of his broad shoulders, tossed the last box upon the fire. It was a narrow, oblong packing-case nearly six feet in

length; and it must have been unusually heavy, for it landed with a dull, sullen thud that sent the hot embers scattering and sizzling upon the snow.

For a while we stood watching the leaping flames, our forms and faces seen in wavy focus through the alternating layers of hot and cold air. Farrell, as was his habit, kept up a running chatter upon inconsequential matters, while Murdock, always taciturn and aloof, watched the dancing sparks through half closed, brooding eyes, as though he saw in them some reflection of his own secret thoughts.

We were not prepared for what followed, although we should have been.

As the fire burned low to its final embers, a ghastly, rounded object appeared. It was a grinning human skull, blackened by the fire, with eye-sockets and jaws filled with glowing coals!

Farrell let out a sharp exclamation, like a yelp, and jumped back. Murdock's breath whistled in his throat, and his figure stiffened like a dog's does at scent of danger. I saw that we had been burning not just a box but a coffin, and said so. We abandoned the remains of the fire to the extinguishing force of the elements.

The shack in which we were to spend the long months of the Antarctic night was snug enough, but small for the occupancy of three men, measuring barely twelve feet in any of its dimensions. Beneath it was a kind of cellar formed by the laying of the foundations, and entered by a trapdoor in the floor, to be used principally for the disposal of refuse. In the roof was a second trap, reached by a rope ladder. This would serve as a means of entrance and egress when the snows buried our ordinary door.

Murdock lit the big hurricane lamp that hung from the rafters, for the red rim of the sun was already low upon the northern horizon, and set about preparing supper. When it was ready, we ate it in silence, our minds busy with many things.

At last, Farrell, who never could hold his tongue at the proper time, spoke.

"Did you see it?" he asked.

"See what?" I inquired when Murdock did not speak.

"That last box. It was a coffin."

"Needless to say," I muttered, hoping to discourage this line of conversation.

"It was some poor devil from the Howell Expedition," Farrell rattled on. "There must be others around here."

Murdock looked up. There was a strange, cold light in his eyes, like the reflection of the sun upon the ice. "Shut up," he growled savagely.

Farrell mumbled something half resentfully, and began to fill his pipe. After that, the subject was dropped.

In the weeks that followed, the Antarctic night settled down upon us. The penguins left for the coastal islands, taking with them the last vestige of sociability that the frozen polar continent possessed. Occasionally, with our sounding instruments we could hear the seals stirring under the ice; but ordinarily there was no sound but the snapping and groaning of the frost as everything froze more solidly.

Finally, even this ceased; we were in a world of interstellar silence disturbed only by the periodic howling of the Antarctic blizzards. The night had descended upon us.

By the end of the first month, the blackness was complete even at midday. Strange stars hung from an ebon sky, so large that their apparent nearness was frightening. The snow was already half way up our windows; and we had to go daily to the roof to remove it from the trapdoor and to clear the ventilator shafts.

One day a strange light appeared at the tops of the windows. Pulling on our furs and face-masks, we climbed to the roof, and beheld the black vault of the sky split with waving banners of red and green light.

The Aurora Australis!

In the vivid, unearthly glare, we could see the white crags of the Admiralty Range, at whose feet we crouched; and in the distance, rising above them, the steep, black sides of Mt. Erebus, a lazy cloud of grey ash drifting about his crater, like the smoke from a funeral pyre. The sight was like a harbinger of evil; and we crept back into the house and fastened the trap above us.

It was shortly after this that the noises began.

Mere whisperings at first, they were audible only when we had settled down in our bunks for our hours of sleep. Then gradually they became louder, like ghostly fingers scratching to get in; and always they brought with them a feeling of melancholy, weighing our spirits down with a sense of cold dread and foreboding.

Murdock grew more and more silent and morose, as if he were brooding over something; while even the talkative Farrell was depressed. As for

myself, I set about being cheerful with a determination that was almost ferocious.

“Did you hear it last night, sir?” Farrell put the question unexpectedly, looking up from the meteorological reports he was writing.

“You mean the house creaking?” I asked, while Murdock watched both of us from his bunk.

“No sir; the voice.”

“Nonsense!” I was deliberately scornful. “What you heard was the timbers creaking under the weight of snow on the roof.”

“But it came from *under* the house sir.” Farrell was annoyingly persistent. “And it was a voice. Murdock heard it, too.”

I turned to Murdock. “What did you hear?”

He looked at me out of moody eyes that reflected the lantern light glassily. “I heard—what he says,” he muttered.

I rose and pulled on my furs; then, with a withering look at my two companions, I climbed the ladder to the roof. I had to be alone for a while, in order to think clearly.

There *had* been a sound that night; a very human-like sound. But it had been *only* a sound; not a voice.

In the days that followed, the house seemed to grow colder. It had always been draughty about the floor and in the night when the fire in the stove was allowed to burn down to a mere bed of glowing coals, the temperature would drop to something that I shiver even now to think about. But now the cold was different. It was no longer the mere absence of heat; it was a positive, sentient force, creeping into our sleeping-bags at night and weaving icy fingers about our hearts.

Worse still, although none of us spoke of it, we were all listening for the voice. Although no verbal agreement had been made, it was tacitly understood that it should not be mentioned again among us.

This had a strange effect. As time passed, we found ourselves talking less and less to one another, fearful lest someone should forget. But always we were listening—listening.

And then one night it came.

We were in our bunks, each pretending to the others that he slept. Suddenly the room was cold; colder even than it had been before, than it had ever been. The dim lamp that hung from the rafters flickered, and its light

took on a weird, greenish hue, like burning sea-salt. We sat up in our bunks and looked at one another, our dilated eyes crying out that all of us had heard.

From the cellar under our house had come a queer dull sound, like the sudden expulsion of air from a container previously sealed.

Something was moving down there, something that was trying to get out. And there was only one way out; the trapdoor in the floor!

In spite of the cold, I felt the sweat start upon my forehead, while my mouth and throat became dry as parchment. I forced myself to reach for the revolver that hung upon the wall beside me; then, by a supreme effort of will, I climbed out of my sleeping-bag.

My legs were trembling under me as I took the few steps to the trapdoor. Gripping the revolver in my right hand, I slipped back the bolt with my left, and began to lift the trap. It came upward with a sort of heave, as if something was pushing from beneath.

The screams from the two men in the bunks came simultaneously. Something was rising through the open trap; something that looked like a thick, white mist! It got into my eyes and throat, blinding and choking me. With the last ounce of strength that remained in me, I slammed the trapdoor down and scrambled back into my bunk.

But it was too late. Something was in the room with us. It had come up through the open trap, and was taking form out of the mist. We saw it take shape. Afterwards, Farrell and I tried to tell each other that what we had seen had been a trick of the light and the damp air let up from the cellar; but we both knew that the thing had assumed the almost nude form of a woman draped in a long white bridal veil. Or was it a shroud?

The figure swayed forward, the curves of its white body gleaming through the veil, its arms outstretched. It glided toward the corner where Murdock cowered in his bunk, but it did not touch him. Instead, it floated toward the ceiling, and disappeared through the roof.

Murdock rose from his bunk like a man hypnotised. Without stopping to put on his furs, he climbed the ladder and began to push open the trap in the roof.

“Murdock, you fool! Come back!” I croaked. “You’ll be frozen to death out there!”

Only a hissing flurry of snowflakes answered me. Then the trap fell shut with a dull, heavy thud...

When the *Stormy Petrel* returned for us in the spring, we had to report the loss of one man.

“Poor devil!” the captain said when he had heard our story. “I guess coming back to this spot was too much for him. He probably didn’t know you’d locate here when he signed up.”

“Why, what do you mean?” I asked. “What had the place to do with it?”

“Oh, I forgot,” he replied. “We didn’t find out who he really was until after we’d left you here. He was Captain Howell, leader of the Howell Expedition. You remember.”

After that I was not surprised when, in dismantling the house, a coffin containing the frozen body of Gloria Howell was discovered in our cellar.